

# **Bullying in Male Physical Education: A figuralational sociological analysis**

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## **Abstract**

Dunning and Sheard's seminal work, *Barbarians, Gentleman and Players*, illustrates the importance of adopting a sociological approach to understanding the development of modern sport. Their specific analysis of the role of football in public schools and peer and pupil-master relations offered an important perspective on changing relations between these social groups. Since then, research on physical education (PE) from a figuralational viewpoint has focused more on teachers' perspectives and experiences, with fewer articles concerning pupils' thoughts. In this article, we revisit power relations within male PE by drawing upon data from a recent ethnographic study in the North East of England. We locate contemporary perspectives and experiences of bullying along long-term shifts in people's attitudes towards violence and conflict resolution. In particular, we consider how the social processes involved in bullying illustrate the nuanced relationships and behaviours young people must navigate and negotiate within increasingly complex contemporary societies. In competitive single-sex PE environments, we demonstrate how young males are required to exhibit heightened levels of control over their emotional and behavioural expression.

**Keywords:** bullying, Eric Dunning, figuralational sociology, masculinity, physical education

In this article we apply figuralational sociology to examine teachers' and pupils' perspectives and experiences of bullying in male Physical Education (PE). 'Bullying' is defined by the UK government as 'behaviour that is repeated, intended to hurt someone either physically or emotionally and often aimed at particular groups of people... bullying can take physical, verbal and cyber forms' (GOV.UK 2020). In response to increasing concerns, all UK state schools must have a behaviour policy in place that includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying (GOV.UK 2020). In response to the growing publicity of the negative and long-lasting consequences for those involved in the bullying process, preventative measures in schools have been adopted (Brown 2018).

This article draws on ethnographic data from one secondary school in the North-East of England in order to situate contemporary debates concerning bullying alongside long-term social processes. We start by discussing Dunning's seminal work on public schools (Dunning and Sheard [1979]2005). Secondly, we discuss the research methods used, outlining how the figural concept of involvement and detachment were adopted in the research process. In the third section we present the data on young males' and teachers' views on bullying and the extent to which they illustrate self- and social constraint, shame and a culture of silence surrounding bullying, and bullying within changing rooms. We conclude by outlining how a figural approach to understanding bullying in PE can aid our understanding of the complexity of relations and emotions experienced by young males.

### **Figural sociology, bullying and long-term social processes**

In line with a figural approach, it is important to discuss bullying by locating it within a long-term perspective. In Dunning and Sheard's (2005, 40) seminal text, *Barbarians, Gentleman and Players*, they outline how 'bullying was the order of the day' in nineteenth century male public schools. Drawing on examples from early forms of modern PE, Dunning and Sheard (2005) discuss how bullying was central to a 'prefect-fagging' system, a system which originated as an unintended form of indirect self-rule where older males dominated. Practices within this system involved older males using their superior physical strength to dominate younger boys, often in a cruel, brutal and vicious manner. In many respects, this type of behaviour was characteristic of the prevailing aggressive masculinity of the time. As Dunning and Sheard (2005) noted, as part of broader changes in social class structures across Britain and inspired largely by bourgeoisie-led reforms of public schools such as Rugby, a modified 'prefect-

fagging' system gradually became socially permitted, formalized and legitimized by masters, providing an effective means of maintaining social order within their on-going power struggles with pupils. Despite such modifications to this system, bullying remained commonplace and was particularly evident within relatively formal violent sports and games (by present-day standards), which became elevated in status across schools and became grounds for the recruitment and selection of prefects. In contrast to present-day values, ruling-class parents supported this system and placed great importance on their sons practising rough sports and games due to their belief that these activities would instil 'manly independence' and character (Dunning and Sheard 2005, 38).

Behavioural norms and attitudes towards 'bullying' can further be understood by drawing on Elias and Dunning's (2008) *Quest for Excitement*. They argue that since the Middle Ages, in the most industrially advanced societies of Western Europe, there has been 'a long-term decline in people's propensity for obtaining pleasure from directly engaging in and witnessing acts of violence' (Dunning 2008, 225). Elias further claimed that this gradual decline involved a lowering threshold of repugnance regarding physical violence, which came to carry stricter taboos against its usage and arouse greater feelings of guilt. This has not automatically meant that levels of violence have reduced, but that there has been an increasing 'tendency to push violence behind the scenes' of public life as well as shifts in the types of violence used (Dunning 2008, 225).

Dunning's (2008) typology of human violence identifies long-term balances between affective and rational forms of violence that have shifted in favour of the latter, a shift that he largely attributes to long-term changes across these societies from segmental to more functional social bonds. This typology of human violence includes: whether it is actual or symbolic, whether it takes place in mock or serious form, whether

it is intentional or an accidental consequence of an unplanned action, whether it is legitimized or breaks acceptable social standards, and whether it takes an affective or rational form. In his identification of 12 structural correlates in types of social bonding, Dunning (2008, 232) relates gradual shifts towards more functional social bonds with gradual changes towards 'nationally integrated communities, tied together by extensive chains of interdependence', 'continuous pressure "from above" from a stable central state', and 'intense pressure generated structurally "from below"'. A recognition of these shifts towards more functional social bonds can aid an understanding of contemporary UK legislative measures that mandate school professionals to combat bullying; a process which has been multifaceted. For instance, in the UK, the criminalization of bullies in schools has been pursued through Ayden's Law, a campaign set-up by a bereaved parent of a young male who committed suicide after being bullied, and backed by a national newspaper (the Sun) . Such high-profile cases, alongside a growing awareness of the detrimental effects of bullying, have contributed to broader changes to the social stigma attached to being labelled a bully.

In Dunning and Elias's analysis of civilizing processes in sport, they note that many sports require relatively high levels of aggression and violence, and that these continue to provide 'enclaves for the socially acceptable ritualized expression of physical violence' (Dunning 2008, 224-225). These forms of violence are codified by rules and regulations, which legitimize their usage without evoking the same levels of shame, embarrassment or repugnance as does violence used in other social realms. In *Sport Matters: Sociological Studies of Sport, Violence, and Civilisation*, Dunning (1999) discusses how the social tolerance of aggression and violence in many sports has proved particularly significant for males in terms of their relative dominance in gender relations. Socially constructed by males for males, many sports have reiterated male

social power through 'the inculcation and public expression of traditional standards of masculinity' (Dunning, 1999, 236). Sports can provide young males with a source of 'hero image' and offers them opportunities to experience 'masculine-validating' rituals through symbolic expressions of machismo.

Previous research on bullying and PE highlights some key themes, such as a lack of adult presence in changing rooms, which often leads bullying to go undetected, while also being unreported by bystanders (Atkinson and Kehler 2012). When bullying takes place outside of changing rooms, PE teachers' interventions are often negligible and, at times, complicit (Li and Rukavian 2012; Tischler and McCaughtry 2011). Such experiences can result in school absenteeism, young people withdrawing from optional PE (Atkinson and Kehler 2012), or avoidance strategies within PE lessons (Tischler and McCaughtry 2011), as victims of bullying form a disinterest or hatred of PE classes as well as experiencing body dissatisfaction (Jachyra 2016). Whilst these papers highlight how bullying manifests itself in PE and detail its negative consequences in terms of physical activity levels, they often fail to offer PE teachers' and young males' perspectives and experiences of social processes within bullying, something we seek to address in this article. In the following section, in which we discuss our research methods, we explore the use of ethnography within a figurational sociological perspective, and issues of involvement and detachment.

## **Method**

In 2015, the first author completed a six-month ethnography in a male PE department in one secondary school in the North-East of England. Colbeck High School (CHS) - pseudonyms are used throughout - was a mixed-sex religion-affiliated state secondary school with over 1500 pupils aged 11-18 years. 75% of pupils were Catholic, 25% were

eligible for pupil-premiums (funds given to schools by the Government to improve the attainment of disadvantaged children), 12% of pupils identified as belonging to black and minority ethnic communities, 10% had English as a second language, and 7% had a registered special educational need (SEN). The school had received a 'good' rating across all components in its most recent Ofsted report, the UK government's office for standards in education that inspects schools. Within the PE department at CHS there were five male teachers, only four of whom were interviewed due to the intermittent absence of one. From those interviewed, Mr Park was Head of PE and had spent 11 years at CHS, while Mr Glovers had spent 13 years, Mr South nine years and Mr Hatton five years. Compulsory PE was taught in a single-sex environment and took place within excellent school facilities. All lessons lasted one hour. In the region, the school had an established reputation for sporting excellence, particularly in football and athletics.

CHS represented much of the North-East of England's relative homogeneity in terms of white working-class communities and was situated in an area previously lauded for its industrial prowess. While located in a traditional Labour heartland, the United Kingdom Independence Party received many votes in the 2015 general election, and the region voted to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum. More recently, the Conservative Party made significant strides in the area in the 2019 General Election. The campaigning and results of such elections and referendums (including the Scottish devolution referendum) represented a decade of turmoil in UK politics whereby 'We-They' identity politics prevailed on key social issues such as self-determination, the welfare state and immigration.

Interviews were completed in the last two months of the ethnographic study, and the data discussed in this article draw on interviews with four male teachers and nine

focus groups with young males in Years Seven, Eight and Nine, ranging from 11-14 years of age. In the semi-structured interviews, teachers were asked questions regarding young males' behaviour and relations with their teachers and peers within an all-male competitive environment. In the focus groups, young males were asked to comment on and answer five questions relating to two vignettes based on everyday scenarios within PE that could be considered on a spectrum from banter, at one end, to bullying at the other. Nichols (2020, 153) provides a useful definition and description of banter:

Banter is a type of humour and interactive practice which involves back and forth interaction, relying upon complicity among those participating to effectively operate ... It is often competitive in nature, a jocular performance which centres on the idea of people 'taking the piss' out of, or 'playing with' each other ... Furthermore, banter is associated with particular spaces, most commonly in those dominated by men including sporting sites.

Vignettes explored these facets of banter as well as probing how they can be differentiated from inappropriate comments or verbal bullying. Vignettes have become increasingly common in educational-based settings as they can offer a more engaging and ethically sound way to elicit young people's views and perspectives of potentially sensitive topics (Dowling et al. 2015). As such, five vignettes were produced by the first author and two were selected for each focus group based on realist accounts across this year group and age-appropriateness. Vignettes were written in clear English, contained one teacher and no more than four young males, and ranged from 119-235 words in length, for example:

"Right boys, I want class A and B to get changed in the big changing room", says Mr Sharp. In the changing room Kyle shouts, "Sam, why do you always sit so close to Joe? Do you fancy him or something?" Kyle's friends laugh and one says, "I bet Sam likes



boys more than girls". Kyle then asks, "Sam, are you gay?" The boys continue to laugh at Sam. By this point Sam gets upset and he doesn't understand why Kyle picks on him. Last week Kyle laughed at Sam's hairstyle, the week before he accused Sam of throwing like a girl. Sam jogs out of the changing room crying and tells Mr Sharp about Kyle and his friends.

After the boys had read the vignettes, a discussion was facilitated by the first author in which young male's views of bullying were explored.

### *Involvement and detachment in ethnographic studies*

Previously Dunning (1992, 1999) has advocated Elias's approach to research, and in particular, his guiding concept of involvement and detachment that stresses that more reality-congruent forms of knowledge can be reached when sociologists adopt varying blends of involvement and detachment throughout the research process. Elias stressed how this approach would help researchers to achieve appropriate degrees of self-consciousness (in other words, reflexivity) and distance themselves from the situation of the moment. However, there have been several debates about the concept and use of involvement and detachment in research. For example, while generally sympathetic to the idea, Rojek (1986) criticized figurational sociologists for failing to provide more specific guidelines for researchers seeking to utilize this concept. However, while acknowledging a vagueness in Elias's original work, Bloyce (2004) questioned the need for a blueprint as per standard research methods and claimed that this may become too reductive, reifying and ultimately removing the flexibility necessary for articulating the messy realities within social science research. This approach advocates that engaging in blends of involvement and detachment should be assessed in a relative and situational manner, dependent on the type of study (Mansfield 2007), and considers how working with the concept of involvement and detachment makes researchers aware of their

position, while ensuring that self-reflexivity is at the centre of this process (Matthews 2019). More contemporary debates have focused on a more blended approach and acknowledge how involvement through ethnographies can provide knowledge of the context and environment being studied (Atkinson 2013). In this regard, it is useful to stress Elias's (1987, 16, cited in Dunning 1999, 244) contention that, 'in order to understand the functioning of human groups one needs to know, as it were, from the inside how human beings experience their own and other groups, and one cannot know without active participation and involvement'.

To ensure that young males' lived realities were represented and not influenced by the first author's own (largely positive) experiences of PE, several reflective processes were implemented to support appropriate degrees of involvement and detachment in the study. An example of a reflexive process involved the first author managing how his embodied, gendered and sporting habitus may have influenced young male's focus group responses. Instances of young males asking gender-based questions (i.e. about the author's beard or sporting biography) were noted in reflexive notes. Therefore, the first author made detours via detachment through not deliberately self-promoting his ascribed identity (i.e. not joining in games during lessons, not engaging in banter-based conversations, and removing himself from non-formal situations). Furthermore, vignettes were used to partially externalize more direct gendered dynamics between interviewer and interviewees. These two brief examples highlight the importance of researchers being 'clear about the limits of their detachment from and involvement in their areas of study' (Perry et al. 2004, 135), particularly when undertaking ethnographic research.

Interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim and were combined with observational fieldnotes as one data set, which was loaded into N-Vivo 12 and

analysed. The use of three merged data-sets enabled triangulation to determine greater reality-congruence, whilst undertaking analysis at the end of the research process offered a secondary re-involvement that involved more co-ordinated theoretical contemplations and more specific engagement with the existing literature. In this sense, 'views such as those expressed...should be treated not as an explanation, but as data to be explained' (Dopson and Waddington 1996, 546) and, as such, the analytical process was driven by Dunning's (1992) notion of the symbiotic process of 'two-way traffic' between theory and data. Therefore, several figurational sociological concepts, such as figuration and habitus, were used as a sensitizing framework when grouping patterns and themes that emerged from the collected data. In the following section, we discuss themes relating to teachers' and young males' perspectives and experiences of bullying, a culture of silence in reporting incidents of bullying, and changing room environments as conducive to bullying.

### **Young males' and teachers' views on bullying: self- and social constraint**

The word 'bullying' regularly featured in conversations around the school, and during the interviews. Mr Hatton, one of the teachers, noted that, 'we have had whole-year assemblies from people from external companies about cyberbullying and the problems with being online, and how to report bullying'. Furthermore, CHS's engagement in the national 'Anti-Bullying Awareness Week' and discussions of bullying within citizenship classes showed that the school was keen to demonstrate their commitment to anti-bullying approaches. Referring to CHS's approach to bullying, Mr South stated that, 'the standard school line is that it won't be tolerated', while Mr Parker noted that the staff handbook contained advice on how to combat bullying. Reflecting on the anti-bullying awareness expected of teachers, Mr Hatton said:

When you are in your newly qualified teacher year, and even during your post-graduate certificate in education, you do something regarding bullying, and what constitutes bullying and how you would deal with a certain situation. And as part of our ongoing continual professional development, we must do child protection things and you look out for signs of how somebody may be acting if they perceive that they are being bullied.

There was an expectation that teachers would know what bullying was, would know how to deal with it, and that they would intervene. This was to ensure that CHS met the legal requirement and social responsibility to raise awareness of bullying and its effects (GOV.UK 2020). The expectation of schools to eradicate bullying can be understood as functional social bonds whereby there is a 'continuous pressure "from above" from a strong central state' (Dunning 2008, 232). Government legislation and teacher-training programmes illustrate social constraints that in part inform common zero-tolerance approaches, which reflect long-term shifts in both the acceptable ways to deal with conflict amongst young people and heightened concerns over the impact of bullying on young people. Contemporary expectations of schools and teachers to address bullying also demonstrate a change in people's attitudes, while implicitly denoting expected teacher-pupil relations based on the social control of the former over the latter.

Furthermore, national anti-bullying awareness weeks tend to focus on educating young people on levels of appropriateness when verbally interacting with their peers. In line with Dunning's (2008) typology of human violence, such a focus appears to represent broader long-term shifts from actual to more symbolic forms of violence, while illustrating that even verbal interactions can break acceptable social standards. The fact that such standards can be broken intentionally *and accidentally* indicates the

sophisticated forms of socialization that young people are expected to embody within and beyond school environments.

Given the focus on educating young people about bullying, the young males interviewed were confident that they understood what constituted bullying; their definitions drew reference to notions of repetition, and thus aligned with government definitions and school training/talks on bullying. For instance, when discussing vignette scenarios, James in Year Eight claimed that, 'if it is a one-off incident then like no, but if it keeps happening every time they play dodgeball, then it's bullying'. Similarly, Year Seven Owen noted that, 'it is meant to be a joke, but when it goes on for as long as this it is bullying'. Discussing levels of intention within repetitive acts, year nine Josh argued that, 'well they probably did [know that they were doing it] because they are in secondary [education], they should know'. Here, James and Owen felt able to distinguish between one-off more banter-like comments from bullying, while Josh clearly expected peers to be able to do the same. This developmental expectation illustrates young males' internalization of social constraints and attitudes towards bullying, which arguably represents a shift towards functional social bonds whereby there is also an 'intense pressure generated structurally "from below"' (Dunning 2008, 232). In one respect, this expectation makes determining intention within bullying easier and renders accidental incidents less acceptable. However, the increasing commonality and frequency of banter that can often involve mockery and sarcasm illustrates the nuances when interpreting and verifying bullying from non-bullying behaviour. The young males show awareness of the need to navigate and negotiate physical and verbal behaviours in their relations with others. They must do this by being socially and emotionally aware of their behaviour in terms of meaning, intention and acceptability, as well as being conscious of how others may receive it.

From the interviews it became apparent that teachers internalized these social constraints and changing attitudes towards bullying. Mr Hatton suggested:

I think a put down is more malicious in my view. If you put somebody down, that to me would be bullying. If you are talking about the absolute negatives about somebody in front of their friends and making them feel like an idiot.

Along with formal training, teachers' views on bullying were also driven by their personal opinions and lived experiences. Reflecting on his experiences of bullying, Mr South stated that common forms of bullying have shifted from more physical to more verbal and emotional forms:

I have never had much of it, but I am not going to say we don't have bullying and it is usually the weaker kids who get picked on. I think bullying as a level is the same, I think the types of bullying are different. I think in the olden days Year 11s might pick up a Year Seven and give them a once over in the toilets. Now it is more social media and verbal stuff.

As identified in previous findings (Hurley 2010; Noret et al. 2105; Symons et al. 2014), the pre-eminence of verbal bullying contrasts with Dunning and Sheard's (2005) portrayal of more physically dominating practices in sports and games in nineteenth-century male public schools. This finding is indicative of a long-term decline in people's (including male's) propensity for obtaining pleasure from directly engaging in acts of violence, and crucially represents a lowering threshold of repugnance regarding physical violence (Dunning 2008). However, evidence of shifts from more expressive to more instrumental forms of bullying in physically competitive PE environments indicate the increasing pervasiveness of contemporary forms of bullying, whereby a verbal put-down or an online comment can be deemed as bullying (either verbal abuse did not occur so frequently in Victorian public schools or was not perceived as

bullying). Furthermore, this shift represents the complexity of socialization processes whereby young people are not only expected to show greater restraint over their physical reactions to others, but are also expected to demonstrate greater levels of self-restraint in their verbal interactions. Thus, by the age of 11, young males are increasingly expected to control their emotional and behavioural expressions. Placed in intellectually and physically competitive environments and during an impressionable phase of their identity development, the young males were expected to relate to, behave appropriately towards, and deal with any conflict with peers, while also being educated in PE.

When discussing vignette scenarios, young males offered broader thoughts on why some young people bully others and why certain young people are more likely to get bullied compared with others. Young males cited identity expression through self-promotion as a critical reason why bullies bully, while they described perceived differences as the main reason why some peers got bullied. Explaining why some peers bully, Year Eight Callum said ‘for the attention’, while his peers, Matt and James, believed that it was ‘to show off’, ‘to look hard’ and to ‘get a laugh’. Highlighting difference as a reason for bullying interactions, Year Nine pupil Josh commented that, ‘people just do it because of [to highlight] anything different’. At the same time, Year Nine Charlie noted that, ‘it is like physical so you can see, so you can easily take the mick out of people, people who are overweight get picked on a lot’. Alternatively, Year Nine Alfie suggested that, ‘it is usually a person who is smaller than them’, whereas Year Nine Max claimed that, ‘it’s like a person who isn’t good at any sports at all’. Young males’ broader references to bullying tended to refer to verbal forms and included gendered and performance-related undertones. These observations were based on social norms and behavioural expectations, which offered some young males self-

promotion opportunities that could involve derogatory comments towards peers. Some young males' decision to act upon such opportunities illustrated more intended rational as opposed to accidental or affective forms of symbolic violence (Dunning 2008).

The increasing pervasiveness of raising awareness of bullying in schools may help explain why little explicit bullying was observed, but at the same time featured regularly in daily conversations. This is interesting given the extent to which bullying is widely viewed as a common, and highly prevalent, problem in schools (Ditch The Label 2019; Stonewall 2017). However, incidents of bullying were not witnessed by the researcher or discussed as problematic *by* teachers in the school. In the following section we discuss the relationship between bullying and shame and how bullying may be increasingly pushed behind the scenes of public life.

### **Shame, bullying and a culture of silence**

It seemed from the interviews that there was a culture of silence surrounding bullying and both teachers and young males made reference to an unwillingness to report bullying. Young males said that they did not think that reporting bullying was a viable option due to the perceived reputational damage at stake. For instance, Year Nine Oliver commented that, 'some people don't like to grass because people like to call them sprag'. 'Sprag' was a word unknown to the first author, but described by young males and teachers as the same as being a 'grass' or 'snitch', which are terms commonly used to denote 'informing on someone' or 'secretly telling someone in authority that someone else has done something they shouldn't have'. Describing the social implications of being labelled a sprag, Year Seven Owen said that, 'nobody would talk to them'. At the same time, Year Eight Alex believed that 'they [sprags] eventually have not a lot of friends'. Teachers were seemingly aware of how the stigma of being



labelled a sprag influenced young males' decisions to report incidents of bullying. For example, Mr Hatton claimed that:

They all know how to report it but it is just whether they do. And I don't know if they think that if they do report it, then they will lose face around school. But then at the same time, if they don't report it then they are going to be putting themselves into [pause] it is Catch-22 isn't it, putting themselves into a predicament.

Aware of this predicament, Mr Parker reflected that, 'we want to know what's gone on, then there is they don't want to sprag. However, there is always someone, you get your little snitches [grins]. There is always a few who will come, and you need them, otherwise kids will get away with a lot of stuff'. It was clear that young males' reluctance to report incidents of bullying was not due to their lack of understanding of what constituted bullying, but was more driven by social repercussions concerning their presentation of self. In this sense, being bullied provided young males with a social dilemma based on experiencing psychological and emotional damage against avoiding being stigmatized and further jeopardizing status within a peer group. As illustrated here, many young males were willing to accept negative experiences to manage their reputation amongst their peers.

In the focus groups young males offered further descriptions of the repercussions of reporting bullying. For instance, Year Seven Ethan elaborated that, 'it is always awkward to tell the teacher because if the teacher goes up to them, there is like a 50 out of 50 chance [i.e. a certainty] that they are going to go back and bully you even more'. Offering a lived experience of such a scenario, Year Seven Mason recalled how:

I went to [female support worker] and she got someone to speak to him and then they said we have had a complaint from the student saying that you had been

bullying Jacob, but erm, and then he would stop, but then straight away other people just came up to me and said, 'why have you been telling other people this?'

This scenario was also recognized by teachers, for example, in reference to a specific incident, Mr South stated:

I will be like 'well Josh did not tell us at the time', so it is very hard to then deal with it afterwards. You need him to come and tell me, but that takes a lot of bottle, to come out of the changing room and say, 'Sir, this has just happened'. Because then you are going to walk straight back in and say, 'Right! You, out!', and they are going to know instinctively [that the incident has been reported].

It seemed that those few young males willing to report such incidents were not aided by teachers' abrupt and direct reactions. While such reactions illustrated the breaking of acceptable social standards, they were surprising given the teachers' acknowledgement of 'Catch-22' scenarios and the perceived 'bottle' needed to report bullying. Teachers' immediate responses appeared to deal with incidents momentarily and in one sense illustrated a zero-tolerance approach, although this approach seemed counterproductive given the reputational damage at stake and social dilemmas young males were faced with. This culture can also perhaps be explained by noting how Elias (2012) contended that as physical punishment decreased within modern societies, shame became increasingly dominant as the main agent of social control due largely to its progressively taboo and invisible nature. Young males' increasing feelings of shame, attached to their socially prescribed inadequacies (i.e. feelings of, 'Why I am being bullied?') are compounded, as admitting to being bullied can be embarrassing and may evoke a form of social stigma.

Further exploring social dilemmas concerning the prevailing culture of silence, it is possible to discuss peers' behaviour in the absence of adult authority figures. For

instance, Year Seven Luke suggested that, ‘I think Joe [fictional bystander in a vignette] should have stood up for him more, he should have said something’, while peer Adam stated that, ‘the people who weren’t doing anything were also bad because they were supposed to go and help him’. Problematizing this stance, Year Seven Ben wondered if, ‘maybe they didn’t help because their friends were pointing and laughing at him’, to which peer Henry added, ‘because they might have felt embarrassed themselves’. Likewise, Year Nine Tom even considered that, ‘it is easier to join in than help him’. James (Year 8) surmised that, ‘it sounds like Kyle and his friends are the popular ones, they don’t want to stand up and say shut up now because like they would just start picking on them’, while Year Nine Josh proclaimed that a failure to intervene was ‘probably in case they got bullied’. In the absence of teachers, young males reasoned that other peers should act but feared the social consequences of doing so. Expectations of duty expressed through terms such as ‘supposed to’ and ‘should’ demonstrate an awareness of what young males *ought* to do, but at the same time young males recognize the potential consequences for them and fear being bullied themselves for intervening.

The evoking of such feelings illustrates broader changes in attitudes towards bullying and its breaking of acceptable social standards, while arguably demonstrating increasing functional social bonds that entail ‘intense pressure generated structurally “from below”’ (Dunning 2008, 232). However, in managing such social expectations concerning intervening in incidents of bullying, young males’ fear of being bullied and losing their peer group status superseded their moral obligations. Further evidencing the ethical and emotional dilemmas bystanders faced, young males depicted a lose-lose situation because while failing to intervene preserved their presentation of self, this failure to act also caused feelings of guilt and shame. One way young males coped with

such feelings was by granting themselves diminished responsibility due to teachers' perceived neglect of duty.

A culture of silence was also evident when young males considered the best ways to react to being bullied. For instance, Year Eight James commented that:

You wanna say something back but it is best to ignore them, because if Mr Sharp does find out and you have not said anything back, then you have done the right thing. But sometimes you feel like you should be saying something back because it's like sort of get a bit of dignity back I guess.

Offering a further reason to ignore such incidents, Year Nine Alfie described how, 'if you are someone who snaps, they would think that you are an easy target because they know that you could say like three words and they would just go off it'. Through identifying ignoring as the best approach, young males described avoidance tactics. For example, Year Nine Alfie reckoned that, 'the easiest thing to do is just stay away from each other and there will be no more conflict'. If this was not possible, as is often the case in confined social spaces, Year Nine Max suggested that people could 'go along with it and laugh at them as well'. This approach was deemed important because, as Year Nine Liam reflected, 'I think he [victim in a vignette] has done the best thing by not showing it because if he started crying or something, they would take it a bit further'. While Dunning's (2008) typology of human violence refers to shifts from affective to rational forms, it seems here that young males considered rational as opposed to affective reactions to symbolic violence as the best option. This denotes an expectation of young males to be able to sufficiently control their emotions when being victimized, and a failure to do so could lead young males to feel a sense of embarrassment. Therefore, as also found by Monaghan (2014), young males' bodies and emotional expressions can promote ridicule, induce embarrassment and be deemed

shameful by oneself and others. Consequently, controlling the body and emotions becomes paramount as forms of young males' self-preservation.

Young males generally rationalized that ignoring peers who bully was the most effective available solution. This created a dilemma. Young males had to be able to distance themselves physically and emotionally from the immediacy of the situation. This further illustrates how by the age of 11 years, young males demonstrated an acute social awareness of what visually and symbolically constituted 'We'- and 'They'-identities, and were able to problematize social situations in relation to the appropriate self-preservation actions needed. This, in turn, reflected advanced forms of self-control in their interdependent relations. One area whereby physical and emotional distancing was problematic for young males was in the confined and highly visible changing rooms, a topic we explore further in the next section.

### **Informal spaces and bullying in changing rooms**

Discussions concerning bullying in PE frequently involved the space of the changing rooms, levels of teacher-provision, and behavioural norms within this context. At CHS teachers were rarely present for the five-to-ten-minute duration of young males getting changed. Reflecting upon this process, Mr Parker noted that, 'I think in an ideal world we would have a staff member in each changing room', while Mr South commented that, 'there is just an awful lot of trust, but unfortunately some kids will [pause]. That's the time we tend to get most issues, but I don't know what there is that we could do about it'. Reflecting on this helplessness, Mr Parker explained how the loss of technicians and quick turnaround times between afternoon lessons meant that 'it would be foolish of me to say "there needs to be somebody in here and there is no excuse [for not being]"'. However, he did accept that:

If there is a teacher in there you are going to get very few issues, if any. If the teacher isn't, there is an opportunity for stuff to go on and it does go on. I would be a liar if I thought that there is not stuff that goes on, bullying, little things that go on that we miss because we are not sitting in there.

Through discussing vignettes, it became clear that many young males thought that a teacher's presence would deter incidents of bullying. For instance, about the role of a fictional Mr Sharp in a vignette, Year Seven Owen believed that, 'he should be monitoring them more', while Year Nine Max claimed that, 'you wouldn't want to do it [targeting a peer] with a teacher around you'. Reflecting on the environmental conditions, Year Eight Frankie stressed that, 'there is a lot of people in a changing room', while Mr South reflected how 'some kids are like "Sir, are you allowed to stand and watch us"', and you are like, "sometimes some of you need it because you can't be trusted to get changed on your own". Adding to Mr South's point, teachers also cited that when they do enter changing rooms, they try to occupy themselves (i.e. checking their iPad) to avoid such suspicious comments by young males.

In contrast to male masters' willingness to turn a blind eye to more overt and extreme forms of bullying in nineteenth century male public schools (Dunning and Sheard 2005), teachers' views here illustrate the breaking of acceptable social standards and their sense of anxiety and responsibility in not being able to eradicate more covert forms of bullying in changing rooms. The accounts here illustrate differences between ideals and lived experience, which in this case appeared driven by practical realities of not being able to monitor up to 30 young males getting changed in a confined space for a short period of time. The approach taken at CHS whereby changing rooms are often unsupervised in terms of adult presence is not unusual and matches those portrayed within previous research. This recognition is problematic considering the school's

broader legal, social and moral obligation to protect young people from any form of bullying. While this was not the main reason at CHS, one general reason why teachers are often not present in changing rooms is due to youth privacy in relation to adults gazing over their semi-naked bodies (Atkinson and Kehler 2012). This perhaps illustrates one unintended and somewhat paradoxical social consequence of long-term shifts towards greater taboos attached to public displays of nudity and growing child protection measures. Here they combine to problematize the adult presence within social spaces such as changing rooms, even though the greater vulnerability of children in this context is recognized.

Due to the identified practical realities and long-term shifts towards youth privacy and away from adults' abilities to gaze over young people's semi-naked bodies, teachers and young males discussed incidents within changing rooms that could be considered bullying. For instance, Mr Parker claimed that, 'it has happened, pulling their pants down in front of everyone, that type of thing', whilst Year Nine Alfie recalled that 'we have had people who have lost their trousers and they have been in the showers, or like they have lost their shoes and they have been hid'. Similarly, Year Seven Ethan suggested that, 'they could get hand towels and whip each other with towels', whereas Year Seven David recounted how 'people often hit each other with ties'. As well as physical behaviours, young males also cited verbal interactions within changing rooms. For example, Year Seven Luke recalled that, 'people ... make fun of me in changing rooms ... it does annoy me, but I don't take it seriously'.

Given previous references to perceived differences as central factors in bullying incidents, it is perhaps not surprising that changing rooms were places where bullying was more likely to occur. However, in contrast to previous literature that portrayed pernicious, abusive and violent incidents (Atkinson and Kehler 2012; Jachyra 2016;

O'Connor and Graber 2014), accounts here tended to describe more ritualistic, overzealous and domineering behaviours. This was enabled by a lack of adult supervision and the material items that could be used in such spaces. However, the fact that such incidents were seemingly pushed behind the scenes of more public aspects of PE and so away from teachers illustrates that the young males were aware of the unacceptable nature of their behaviour, as well as the unlikely situation that young males would tell teachers about the behaviour of others. This highlights the role of teachers as civilizing influencers in young male group behaviour, whilst highlighting their wider role in maintaining social control within schools.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we revisit Dunning's (1992, 1999) and Dunning and Sheard's ([1979]2005) research on teacher-pupil and peer relations in school sport in nineteenth century male public schools and we provide empirical data on these relations in the modern context. Our article offers a differing perspective on the levels and common types of bullying in male PE and, in examining social processes through a longer-term developmental approach, we see how changes in people's attitudes and behavioural norms towards accepted ways of interacting with others have impacted on the socialization of young males and their experiences of PE. While in a highly social and physically competitive environment that aroused relatively stronger and deeper emotions of pride, shame and anger (than, e.g. in most classroom-based subjects), young males were expected to control their emotional and behavioural expressions despite the identity connotations at stake. Of particular interest in relation to the expectations on young people in their communication with others is the role of shame: not, as you might expect, in regard to being identified as a bully, but in relation to the



more significant role that shame played as a reason for not seeking help or reporting bullying.

Bullying in male PE provided a case study from which to advocate the need to adopt blends of involvement and detachment when researching bullying and peer relations in PE. To date, much bullying research is present-day focused, while knowledge of the prevalence of bullying in schools is generally derived from survey data collected from value-based organizations such as Stonewall (which campaigns for equality of lesbian, gay, bi and trans people across Britain). These trends contribute towards the social issue of bullying being presented in an emotionally charged manner, one which while representing modern sensitivities towards violence, also often involves ideological underpinnings or value-laden perspectives and interventions. Similar overly involved persuasions can be found in research in which PE is commonly taken for granted as being intrinsically good, an assumption that is particularly evident in the current context of viewing PE as solving issues surrounding health and obesity. Such advocacy-based research is usually undertaken by well-intended but often emotionally invested former PE professionals and is often part-informed, or used for lobbying purposes, by key stakeholders such as the Youth Sport Trust (Green 2006). Arguably one way of developing an appropriate balance of involvement and detachment is by seeking to develop empirically based theorizing, as advocated by Dunning (1992). The case study we present in this article provides only a snapshot of such an approach. Therefore, future research from a figurational research on peer relations may benefit from focusing on: 1) the complexities of peer relations and individual civilizing processes; 2) changing teacher and pupil relations in PE; 3) the expectations of young people and teachers to respond to peer and teacher conflict in the context of PE; 4) the role of shame in educational settings as a form of social control; and 5) the identity

formation and role of 'We-' and 'I-' identities in young peoples' educational experiences.

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